

1-1-2007

The St. Eustace legend as palimpsest in Hoban's Riddley Walker

Martin L. Warren

University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, mlwarren@stthomas.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.stthomas.edu/cas_engl_pub

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Medieval History Commons](#), and the [Medieval Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Warren, Martin L., "The St. Eustace legend as palimpsest in Hoban's Riddley Walker" (2007). *English Faculty Publications*. Paper 58. http://ir.stthomas.edu/cas_engl_pub/58

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UST Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UST Research Online. For more information, please contact libroadmin@stthomas.edu.

SF-TH Inc

The St. Eustace Legend as Palimpsest in Hoban's "Riddley Walker"

Author(s): Martin L. Warren

Source: *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Mar., 2007), pp. 158-163

Published by: [SF-TH Inc](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4241511>

Accessed: 10/10/2013 12:08

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



SF-TH Inc is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Science Fiction Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The St. Eustace Legend as Palimpsest in Hoban's *Riddley Walker*. In *Riddley Walker* (1980), Russell Hoban uses the medieval legend of St. Eustace as the basis for his fictional society. Used to project a folklore, a system of belief, for a future world, the legend (and its additions by Hoban) acts as a palimpsest, a text of many layers. It explains the origins and present circumstances of Riddley Walker's society, acts as a chemical formula providing the ironic renewal of technological capabilities, and illuminates the narrator's personal story.

The legend of St. Eustace was one of the most popular stories of the Middle Ages. Originally known as Placidus and a captain of the Emperor Trajan, the future saint was out hunting when he saw a white stag between whose horns appeared a bright light that formed a cross on which was the figure of Christ. The Christ figure spoke: "Placidus, I am Christ whom you have hitherto served without knowing me. Do you not believe?" Placidus answered, "Lord, I believe." The vision then told him that he would suffer many tribulations, but that the Lord would not forsake him. Placidus, his wife, and two sons were baptized and Placidus took the new name Eustace.

He experienced much suffering, for his wife was carried away by pirates and his sons by wild beasts. Eustace fled to the desert to pray and after fifteen years his family was miraculously reunited. But when they refused to give thanks to the Roman gods, they were condemned by the emperor. All four were shut up in a huge brass bull, under which a fire was kindled, and thus they died (Ferguson 117-18).

Having outlined the medieval legend, let me turn to Hoban's use of the legend. *Riddley Walker* is set in a desolate landscape long after civilization as we know it has been destroyed. At the center of this landscape lies Cambry, the

remains of the present-day English city Canterbury. Christianity is long defunct, and what religion remains is carried from place to place by traveling puppeteers who put on a “Eusa show” that is derived from the fifteenth-century wall painting of the legend of St. Eustace in Canterbury Cathedral.

The Eusa story has within it fragmentary references to history that are not even known to the people who speak the words containing those fragments, that is, those “residues and traces of the invisible” that Andreas Huyssen speaks of as palimpsest (7). Yet the St. Eustace legend is still recognizable and serves a number of functions.¹ The main details of the Eusa story likewise describe a martyrdom. Eusa, a scientist, works for Mr. Clevver at a time when civilization possesses technological instruments such as airplanes, television, computers, and so on. Eusa’s land is at war. Mr. Clevver decides that an end to the war can be achieved by means of a weapon, the “1 Big 1,” and sends Eusa to find “the Littl Shynin Man the Addom he runs in the wud” (Hoban 30). Eusa goes to the wood to hunt down the Littl Shynin Man. Eventually, he comes across the “Stag uv the Wud,” and stretched between its antlers is the Littl Shynin Man the Addom. The stag says, “Eusa yu ar talkin tu the Hart uv the Wud. Nothing wil run frum yu enne mor but tym tu cum & yu wil run frum evere thing” (31). Eusa shoots the stag, grabs the Littl Man, and demands the knowledge to create the 1 Big 1, but the Littl Man tells Eusa that he already has the knowledge. Frustrated, Eusa pulls the Littl Man the Addom apart. As he does this, Eusa sees the knowledge that he needs and gives Mr. Clevver the information, which is used to make nuclear weapons that bring about total devastation. Eusa leaves with his wife and two sons to find a safe place to live. They find a boat, but the captain, wanting Eusa’s wife for himself, throws Eusa and the two boys overboard. Eusa loses his sons. The Littl Shynin Man then appears in one piece again and tells Eusa that he must undergo the “Master Chaynjis” (30-36).

The Eusa story reinscribes the St. Eustace legend, which Hoban clearly points to as its parent: Goodparley reads to Riddley the legend of St. Eustace, written on an ancient piece of paper (Hoban 123-24). The old piece of paper is presumably a tourist pamphlet used to describe the wall painting in Canterbury Cathedral prior to its destruction.

Points of correspondence and difference between the St. Eustace legend and the Eusa story are as follows:

Table 1: The St. Eustace Legend and the Eusa Story

Eustace Legend	Eusa Story
1. Emperor Trajan	1. Mr. Clevver
2. Placidus/Eustace is captain of the guards.	2. Eusa works on military weapons.
3. His persevering charity leads him to be lighted to the truth.	3. Eusa is skilled in science. He is sent to find the truth.

4. Placidus/Eustace goes hunting with dogs.	4. Eusa hunts the answer with dogs.
5. Placidus/Eustace meets a white stag. Between its horns is a bright light with Christ on a cross.	5. Eusa meets the stag with the Littl Shynin Man the Addom.
6. Stag/Christ says: "I am Christ. You pursue me, yet I have hunted you."	6. The figure reveals he is the Littl Shynin Man the Addom.
7. Placidus/Eustace says to the Stag/Christ: "Make me understand and I shall believe."	7. Eusa kills the stag. He demands the answer he seeks from the Littl Shynin Man.
8. Placidus/Eustace is told to be baptized.	8. The Littl Shynin Man tells Eusa he has the answer already. In his rage, Eusa tears the Little Shynin Man the Addom apart and finds the answer he needs.
9. Placidus and his family are baptized and he takes the name Eustace.	9. —
10. Now named Eustace, he returns to the forest. Christ says Eustace must undergo trials to escape vanity and be lifted up.	10. At story's end, Eusa is told he must undergo all the "Master Chaynjis."
11. Plagues befall Eustace. In shame he leaves with his family.	11. With his family Eusa flees the calamities of war.
12. Eustace and his family find a ship. The captain seizes Eustace's wife and abandons Eustace and his sons.	12. Eusa and his family find a ship. The captain seizes Eusa's wife and abandons Eusa and his sons.
13. Eustace comes to a river where in crossing he loses both sons to wild animals.	13. Eusa stays by a river and loses both sons to wild animals while trying to swim after them.
14. Eustace is found by soldiers and returns to the military.	14. —

15. On campaign, Eustace finds his wife at an inn. His sons are also there. The family is united.	15. —
16. Eustace and his family return to Rome where they refuse to sacrifice to the pagan gods.	16. —
17. The family is put in a heated bronze bull where they die and go to heaven.	17. —

Following Huyssen's idea of the palimpsest, we can see how as time has passed, individual memory, collective memory, and narrative history have intertwined through the medium of the St. Eustace legend to construct a version of the past that accounts for and shapes the present of Riddley's world. Hoban cleverly transplants the elements of a past technological society into the present. The picture of computers rapidly working is clear to us: "Evere thing blippin & bleapin & movin in the shiftn uv thay Nos. Sum tyms bytin sum tyms bit" (31). The figure of Christ on the cross becomes the Littl Shynin Man stretched and broken in two by Eusa in his search for the 1 Big 1. The breaking of the Littl Shynin Man the Addom parallels nuclear fission and results in the 1 Big 1, which is put to use in "barms" (bombs). Nuclear war brings down civilization and plagues ensue, beginning new trials for Eusa and society.

Hoban has taken a legend from the Middle Ages and transplanted it successfully to a fictional future setting and to a different audience, making it the foundational story that lies at the heart of the extrapolated world of *Riddley Walker*. This story functions at a number of levels. First, the Eusa story is "used" by survivors of a nuclear holocaust to explain their consciousness of a "Fall" in their history. Hoban says of the story: "the language degrades the past. The situation they're in is a result of all those clever people before them. Over two or three thousand years they've downgraded all the names, so Herne Bay becomes "Horny Boy" ... —they want to show that they don't respect the old names" (McCaffery and Gregory 130). In other words, we have a past made present in the Eusa story and a present understanding of that past as revealed through Goodparley's reading of the St. Eustace legend.

Hoban's post-holocaust legend ends with Eusa's being told that he must undergo the "Master Chaynjis," which means that the trials of Eusa and his descendants, Riddley's people, are by no means over. At the end of each Eusa show, there comes the time for "connexion" to find out what is coming to the people next. Riddley, as a son of a "connexion man," must be a "connexion man" as well. But where does the tradition of combining the Eusa story with "connexions" come from? Goodparley provides the answer by telling the sequel to the Eusa story.

The sequel relates how Eusa is stoned by the people of Cambry. He moves from town to town, nine in all, and is tortured in each one until he comes back

to Cambry, where he is killed. His severed head is stuck on a pole, but it continues to speak, bringing further troubles to the town until the head is thrown into the sea. The head swims from Inland to the Ram and tells the people to make a show with hand-puppets to keep in memory how the hardship has come upon them. Moreover, they are to have a person as an "Ardship" who will ask questions until the answer they need is found. Then all will be reunited and will be well (121-22). The story progresses beyond a mere retelling of the past. Coupled with the tradition of the "Fools Circel 9wys" and the "connexions," it is a way of leading the people forward in hopes of finding the answer that they need. Yet "connexions" are little more than a shot in the dark; their haziness means that the people progress very slowly. They need another level of interpretation that will take the story beyond an explanation of the "Fall" and give them a specific direction. This new interpretation is provided by Goodparley, who finds it in the legend of St. Eustace. He sees the ancient tourist pamphlet as "writing ... about some kind of picter or dyergam which we dont have that picter all we have is the writing" (124). Connecting the Eusa story to the legend of St. Eustace, Goodparley gives the Eusa/Eustace story an entirely new interpretation as a chemical equation: "Who ever this bloak wer what wrote our Eusa story he connectit his self to this here Legend or dyergam and the chemistry and fizzics of it becaws ... the 2 of them ben past down to gether in the Mincery" (127).

A tabulation of Goodparley's connections clarifies the chemical equation he takes from the story:

Table 2: St. Eustace Legend as Chemical Formula (see pp. 127-129)

St. Eustace Legend	Chemical Formula Elements
1. St. Eustace is seen on his knees before his quarry.	1. "Quarry is a kind of digging"
2. a cross of radiant light	2. "same as radiating lite or radiation"
3. the figure of the crucified Savior	3. "Figure—Number of the yellerboy stoan"
4. Savior	4. "Saviour—saver—salt—the yellerboy stoan"
5. Crucified	5. "cruciboal"—crucible
6. Brazen bull	6. "Brazing boal"

Goodparley's chemical interpretation gives the people gunpowder. The present and the past will be reunited by means of the added chemical equation or formula. In terms of the palimpsest, the Eusa/Eustace story becomes a means

not just for explaining the past but for seeking possibly tragic future directions. The story also becomes an equation, a chemical formula.

A final layer of meaning provided by the St. Eustace legend is to be found in the character of Riddley himself. Hoban draws a number of similarities between Riddley and St. Eustace. Riddley, like Eustace, is a hunter. Just as Eustace's trials follow his baptism and the taking of a new name, so Riddley's troubles begin at the time of his naming day. He loses his father, kills a man, and is forced to flee his hunting/foraging group, losing his large extended family. He travels from place to place, meeting troubles along the way.

Unlike St. Eustace, Riddley is never reunited with his extended family and does not die, but other elements of the St. Eustace story are visible in Riddley's own: "Riddley is the one who brought the missing ingredient for the gunpowder, and he's also the new artist" (McCaffery and Gregory 134-35). In the novel, Hoban uses Riddley to link (and recapitulate) the Eusa/Eustace stories.—**Martin L. Warren, University of St. Thomas**

NOTES

1. For a more detailed examination of the Eusa story as myth, see Mustazza.

WORKS CITED

- Ferguson, George. *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*. New York: Oxford UP, 1954.
- Hoban, Russell. *Riddley Walker*. New York: Summit, 1980.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003.
- McCaffery, Larry and Sinda Gregory. *Alive and Writing. Interviews with American Authors of the 1980s*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987. 126-150.
- Mustazza, Leonard. "Myth and History in Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*." *Critique* 31.1 (Fall 1989): 17-26.